

Debate

Should Communities Set Teen Curfews?



Tom Burton

YES

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NO

Margot Smullyan-Capra is a high school English teacher and active member of the Seattle Education Association. This year, she's using her 31 years of classroom experience to counsel and become mentor to beginning teachers and veterans who need assistance.

Once upon a time, parents weren't afraid to set guidelines or impose restrictions on their children's behavior. They understood that loving their children required setting limits and saying no.

That time is gone. Too many of today's parents just don't want to be responsible for their children.

A case in point: A parent dropped a 12-year-old child off in downtown Orlando at 8 o'clock one recent morning. At 2 o'clock the following morning, the child was still downtown. That's neglect, plain and simple.

Since parents won't parent their children, someone or some entity must try to save the youngsters from themselves—and others. If that means imposing a curfew, I say so be it.

Since June 1, Orlando has banned anyone 17 and younger from a 12-block downtown area from midnight until 6 a.m., every night of the week.

First-time violators are asked to leave the downtown area. Repeat offenders are cited for trespassing or held in the auditorium of police headquarters until their parents or guardians pick them up.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rules. If kids are with their parents, traveling on Interstate 4 through the downtown area, working, or responding to an emergency, they're within the law.

Kids who are going to or from an event sponsored by a civic, school, or religious organization are also exempted from the rules.

So far, I think the curfew is working. The downtown area is safer for kids. Kids aren't being harassed. In fact, the curfew hasn't caused much trouble at all.

The police are doing a very good job. They've been taught how to deal with situations and problems without becoming confrontational. They issue warnings and give kids a certain amount of time to leave. If they won't go, police officers pick them up and call their parents.

Some of these parents are being charged with neglect. Others are encouraged to take parenting classes to learn

how to set limits. Whatever happens, parents of kids who are picked up are being forced to be accountable.

The ACLU says any curfew "puts young people under house arrest." But we all have restrictions on us. We can't trespass. We can't loiter in certain places. If we do, we're subject to arrest. These laws are already on the books.

Sure, I wish we didn't have to impose curfews. It's certainly a sad state of affairs. It would be a better solution by far if parents asserted control of their children.

But today's parents don't seem to understand the difference between a parent and a buddy. Too many parents want their children to like them.

Used to be, parents could say no and, if their children didn't happen to like them at that moment or that week, the parents held their ground. They survived.

Used to be, when young people were out of the house at 2 o'clock in the morning, they were with their parents or another responsible adult. Once upon a time, chaperoned group activities ended at 11 p.m. and those out on dates had to be home by midnight.

Did my children have a parent-imposed curfew? Of course. Did they like being told no? Of course not. Are we friends now? You bet we are. Now that they've become the dreaded parents, they see things more clearly.

Today, there are too many parents who are immature either chronologically or emotionally, too many who are simply not equipped to be parents.

It's sad but true that their offspring are getting into lots of trouble or "parenting" themselves to death. They have no one to give them moral direction. They are prey to the deviants out on the streets who give them drugs and alcohol, even force them into prostitution.

If a legally imposed curfew can save these kids from that kind of fate, I welcome it.

Used to be we didn't have to worry so much about our kids. Used to be, but not anymore.

While it may be tempting to lock our adolescents behind the doors of a curfew, throw away the key, and tell our police officers to keep order, it won't work. Worse, it won't even create the safety we all crave.

The idea of a curfew is usually raised as a reactionary outcry when violence is on the increase. That's been the case here in Seattle, where people have flirted with the idea. So far, thank goodness, wiser heads have prevailed.

Needless to say, the availability of guns and ammunition signals madness to anyone who stops to pay attention. Like everyone else, I'm afraid of weapons in the hands of young people.

I'm afraid of the consequences of brutality and the urban metaphor of a gun on every corner. And I understand the feelings of community residents who say that a curfew is one tool in the arsenal of defense against unknown assailants and strangers.

But, for a number of reasons, I don't believe the solution lies in trying to legislate behaviors.

For one thing, curfews aren't enforceable. We simply can't afford the staggering number of police officers it would take to do the job.

Without appropriate enforcement, teens will ignore the curfew. To have laws on the books that are ignored affects the credibility—even trivializes—important laws. What kind of lesson is that for our young people?

Second, curfews deny an understanding of the evolution of our world. Whether we like it or not, in today's world kids and parents work at night.

Families don't fit into the box of the 1950s when everybody was at home watching Ed Sullivan at 8 o'clock. It strikes me as naive to even talk about that kind of society.

Third, curfews interfere with the democratic right of an individual to function in a free society. I don't like the idea of police officers approaching anyone who appears to be disobeying a curfew. And I'm concerned that curfews set up

another reason for people of color to be harassed.

Let's be honest. Exactly who are we trying to control here anyway? And which kids will suffer most?

Is it out of frustration at our inability to systematize morality, civility, and justice that we blame the victims?

Fourth and most important, by legislating laws out of fear, we end up battling our collective heads against a very strong and normal force—the aging process. As teens grow up, they need to separate from their parents, assert their independence, and accept responsibility for their actions.

When young people separate from the important adults in their lives, they move away and place themselves in danger. Through the risks they take, they develop survival skills, they learn to behave. That's how it's always been and always will be.

If we settle for the addition of law to help us parent, then we lose out on a rare opportunity to teach real skills to these kids. We need to teach them how to make intelligent choices on their own.

If teenagers can come to the realization that the world of the streets is dangerous and can decide to behave conservatively—out of respect for the very real dangers out there—the behavior will become part of the fabric of their lives. More important, they'll share that lesson with their peers.

If a curfew isn't the answer, what is? To educators, I say let's put some energy into curriculums that emphasize decision making, show kids how to have sober fun, and teach them responsibility.

To citizens and politicians, I say let's make a serious, systematic effort to treat drug and alcohol abuse and rehabilitate those who've been jailed.

To all, I say we must work to support, even reinvent, the family—the glue that historically has held our society together.

The curfew is a concept born of desperation. Some say it's a necessary evil. I say it's a dangerous precedent that isn't good for us or our children.

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